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Multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 54/82 B of 6 December 1999, the General Assembly took note with appreciation of the efforts of the Secretary-General to develop and enhance the United Nations web sites in all official languages of the Organization, requested him to pursue those efforts and to continue to develop proposals for consideration by the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session, having in mind the goal of achieving modular parity among the official languages, and stressing that that goal should be achieved in a cost-effective manner and with a focus on textual content.

2. Recognizing the importance of parity among all United Nations official languages, the General Assembly, in its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999 on the programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, decided to convert three positions relating to web sites in Arabic, Chinese and Russian into established posts.

II. Executive summary

3. The further development, coordination, production and management of information content on United Nations web sites will require a substantial increase in the level of investment, as will the upgrading of the related technical infrastructure. This is primarily based on the need to: (a) vastly increase the timely dissemination of information and data to a wider and rapidly growing audience; (b) effect cost savings by limiting hardcopy distribution, and/or by shifting printing to the end-user; (c) present information that is constantly updated; and (d) present and promote through the Internet, education and public understanding of the United Nations and of the issues before it.

4. In the context of consideration of the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites, the first task would be to rationalize the structure of the sites, requiring a feasibility study on the complete redesign and restructuring of the sites in order to render them more user-friendly and flexible. Such a study should be conducted through the use of outside industry experts. The cost of the study, which is not included in the programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, is estimated at US$ 100,000.

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5. Before such a study is undertaken, however, a sound foundation for ensuring the ongoing regular maintenance and enhancement of United Nations web sites needs to be established on the basis of resource requirements set out in proposal C-3, contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites, considered by the Committee on Information at its resumed twenty-first session, held from 1 to 5 November 1999 (A/AC.198/1999/9 and Corr.1 and 2). Without this administrative and budgetary support — the minimum necessary for the continuation of the present level of this activity — the desired objective of narrowing the differences among the web sites in all official languages, with the eventual achievement of parity, will not be attained. The resource requirements outlined in the present report pertain only to the requirements of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat with regard to the management, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites. The infrastructure and technical support requirements for the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, which are essential to this activity, have not been included. Provision of content in other languages will also require additional resources.

III. Background

6. The first report on this issue (A/AC.198/1999/6), considered by the Committee on Information during the first part of its twenty-first session in May 1999, outlined three proposals. The first option would have ensured full parity among all official languages by the end of 2001 and would cost $560 million in a one-time investment during 2000-2001 and approximately $26 million, excluding staff costs, in recurring biennial expenditures. The second option would have sought to achieve parity among all official languages on an incremental basis, and would have cost the same amount but the one-time investment would have been spread over a longer period of time. The third option would have sought to balance the need for parity and realistic availability of resources and would have concentrated on bolstering the existing set-ups with parity introduced in modules.

7. As requested by the Committee on Information, in the follow-up report considered at the resumed twenty-first session, (A/AC.198/1999/9 and Corr.1 and 2) three additional proposals were put forward, together with the respective resource requirements, under the third proposal (option C) mentioned in paragraph 6 above. The first entailed the translation and rendition of the contents of the present United Nations web sites into all official languages on an incremental basis with no time-frame for achieving full parity. The second proposed that only selected basic modules, including the audio-visual module, be translated and made available on the web sites on an ongoing basis. The third sought to establish a sound foundation for the current maintenance and enhancement activities of the web sites, with provision of content in other official languages related to the level of usage of the sites in those languages.

IV. United Nations web sites

8. The United Nations web site (www.un.org) was launched on 26 June 1995 as a pilot project in connection with the observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization, in English only, and featuring basic information on the work of the Organization. It was formally launched in September of that year and has since evolved into one of the major activities of the Department, but without the corresponding allocation in the regular programme budget of the Organization. The web site has undergone a series of expansions, with the addition of French and Spanish sites in September 1996, a Russian site in April and Arabic and Chinese sites in November 1998. In March 1998, a daily United Nations radio news service in English and French was added, followed by Spanish soon thereafter. One year later, in March 1999, the first United Nations audio-visual web site was launched, including United Nations radio feature programmes illustrated by photographs and other graphics, as well as audio and video clips. In addition, 31 United Nations information centres so far have also developed their own web sites in 17 languages to deliver the United Nations message and materials in local languages and adapted to the local context, as appropriate.

9. The United Nations web sites now transfer over nine gigabytes (9,000 megabytes) of information on a daily basis and receive approximately five million accesses every week from more than 152 countries. The tremendous growth in the use of the web sites is shown by the increase in the number of accesses: from

489,000 in January 1996 to over 12 million in January 1999 and 21 million in January 2000. This translates to serving more than 11 files every second, every day. It is important to emphasize that these accomplishments were all achieved from within existing resources.

V. Current situation

10. The United Nations web sites are managed by the Information Technology Section in the Department of Public Information, with content being generated in various parts of the Department and the Secretariat as well as by some offices away from Headquarters. While the Department provides overall presentation guidelines for the entire web site, technical support relating to hardware and software issues is the responsibility of the Information Technology Services Division in the Department of Management. Since the establishment of the web site in 1995, no additional resources have been allocated for this activity. As such, resources were reassigned from within the Department to initiate the activity, and recognizing that web site operations would become part of the Secretariat's regular activities, the Information Technology Section was created in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General to facilitate the overall coordination and management of the web site.

11. Similarly, it should be noted that the technical infrastructure support essential to this activity has also been provided by the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, within existing resources.

12. The web sites for United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and other locations are managed locally and have not been subject to direction from the Department of Public Information. The web sites of the regional commissions are all operated independently, with only the site of the Economic Commission for Africa being hosted on the United Nations web server in New York, but maintained directly from Addis Ababa. As such, while those offices are part of the Secretariat, their web sites are not under one operational umbrella for content or technical purposes. They also have separate web addresses, which are not uniform. The web addresses are provided in annex II for reference purposes.

13. In section E of its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure that, in formalizing the structure of the Information Technology Section the six official languages were treated equally. It also requested him to ensure that the goal of equal treatment of the six official languages was taken into account in the course of the continuous development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites.

14. As noted in paragraph 2 above, three positions funded from the general temporary assistance resources were converted into established posts. Consequently, the current level of staff resources for web site operations includes six Professional and five General Service established posts. These are supplemented by three Professional posts and one General Service post funded from general temporary assistance resources.

15. The United Nations CyberSchoolBus, which is part of the global teaching and learning project and is funded by the Trust Fund for Education, was made part of the Information Technology Section in January 1999.

16. On substantive and policy issues, an interdepartmental working group on Internet matters meets periodically to discuss progress in enhancement of the web site. The Publications Board recently finalized an administrative instruction on electronic publishing, laying down policy guidelines for the United Nations presence on the Internet. The guidelines deal with content planning, responsibility, domain names and publications policy. The communications group convened by the Director of Communications and Special Projects in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General also regularly reviews various web site activities and decides on policy matters.

17. It has proven difficult to identify qualified staff from within the Department for redeployment without affecting the delivery of other mandated activities. Furthermore, those who have been assigned have had to undergo additional training. In addition, the limited number of established posts relative to the workload has required a greater reliance on general temporary assistance funds. The recent conversion by the General Assembly of positions funded from the general temporary assistance funds into established posts is the first step in providing resources specifically for web site operations. However, the need to continuously update and maintain the web sites, which is an enormous ongoing task, will still consume the major

part of staff resources, leaving little time for activities relating to the enhancement and development of the web sites.

VI. Future development and proposals

18. The new momentum that has been created by the development of the United Nations web site will be maintained and built on, with the regular addition of new material. Emphasis will be placed on enhancing the contents and presentation in all the official languages as a clear priority in the development of the United Nations presence on the Internet. However, in order to fully reap the benefits of the new technology and to make any headway towards achieving a measure of language parity, as well as to be able to fully reap the potential of this medium, additional investments will be required over the course of the next few years to establish a firm foundation for the maintenance, enhancement and enrichment of the web sites.

19. In the context of considering the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites, it is also vital that the subject of content creation be seen as a separate requirement from the ongoing maintenance, coordination and management aspects. It must be emphasized that in order for any material to be made available on the web sites, it has first to be created. The main issue in this regard is that public information materials and other unofficial documents are not always routinely available in all of the official languages. On the other hand, all parliamentary documentation is available in all six official languages. These two issues — content creation and ongoing maintenance, coordination and management — need to be dealt with separately, because content creation is decentralized, with the author offices assuming responsibility, while coordination, management and overall enhancement remain centralized.

20. As indicated in earlier reports, an essential task would be to rationalize the structure of the web sites. This would require a study on the complete redesign and restructuring of the web sites in order to render them more flexible and user-friendly. Since the expertise required for such a study is not available in-house, a feasibility study would need to be conducted by outside industry experts. The estimated cost of the study is $100,000, which has not been included in the programme budget for the current biennium. The study would be conducted across departments in the Secretariat and would require approximately six months to be completed. It is expected that the study would formulate realistic proposals for redesigning, restructuring and refocusing the web sites, including the multilingual aspects, together with the necessary hardware and connectivity requirements, and the time-frame for implementation. Particular attention would need to be accorded to enhancing the search facility, extending it to cover all official languages. The study would delineate the comprehensive resource investments essential for the achievement of this objective across the entire web site operation — the Department of Public Information for the regular maintenance, enhancement and creation of public information content, the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management for the technological infrastructure and support services, as well as other content-providing departments and offices in the Secretariat and away from Headquarters.

21. As has been indicated in the earlier reports to the Committee on Information (A/AC.198/1999/6 and A/AC 198/1999/9), before embarking on any plan to enhance the web sites, the initial consideration should be to establish a sound foundation for ensuring the regular maintenance and enhancement. To that end, the Department of Public Information reiterates that proposal C-3 (see para. 5 above), constitutes the minimum resource requirements for this undertaking. In the light of recent redeployments and the conversion of three posts by the General Assembly, these requirements have been adjusted and are presented in annex I to the present report. In the absence of such administrative and budgetary support, the objective to narrow the increasing gaps among the web sites in the official languages, with the eventual achievement of parity, will not be attained.

22. The issue of making parliamentary documentation available on the web sites is a matter requiring further guidance from the General Assembly, which in resolution 51/211 F of 15 September 1997 indicated that parliamentary documentation be made available on a fee-for-service basis, determined by the associated costs.

VII. Some observations

23. The major difference between the mere performance of a task and performing it well lies in the impact realized from the performance. There is also a direct correlation between the level of resources allocated and the results achieved. It should be recognized that the current level of web site operation has been accomplished primarily through temporary and ad hoc arrangements, using temporary assistance funds and a creative realignment of activities.

24. This situation argues for a more coordinated approach to the United Nations web sites, since the management and coordination of web site issues can no longer continue to be an ad hoc activity, given the growing importance, visibility and high level of activity on the Internet.

25. The Department of Public Information, in undertaking the responsibility for the overall management, operations and enhancement of the web sites across the Secretariat as well as some of the offices away from Headquarters, has taken on additional tasks that could not have been foreseen and for which there has been no budgetary allocation. Instead, the costs associated with these additional tasks have been borne almost solely by the Department. The Department is looking into ways of enhancing cooperation with content-providing departments, while minimizing such associated costs.

26. Web site matters are fast encompassing the entire Organization. The fact that the Committee on Information scheduled a resumed session to consider a single issue, that of the web sites is a testimony to this. Internet matters have been discussed by various intergovernmental bodies and separate independent mandates have been given to the Department of Public Information on several occasions. In its resolutions 54/41 of 1 December 1999 and 54/92 of 6 December 1999 the General Assembly called upon the Department of Public Information to create web sites on Bethlehem 2000 and decolonization, respectively, within existing resources. While the Department will make every effort to establish those web sites within the appropriate time-frame in as many of the official languages as possible, it should be noted that these mandates will strain the already stretched resources and will detract from the main goal ahead, i.e., linguistic parity.

VIII. Recommendations and conclusions

27. It has now become necessary to consider Internet activity as an integral part of the Organization's work programme. As such, in the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005, as well as in the budget proposals of the Department of Public Information for the biennium 2002-2003, the operation, maintenance and enhancement of the United Nations web sites will be included as part of a regular subprogramme. However, for the full multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites, it is essential that each content-providing office include web-specific content to be made available on the web sites, as part of its regular programme activity, and make budgetary provisions accordingly. Provisions will also need to be made for the technological infrastructure support for these activities.

28. Furthermore, since Member States have indicated that web site activities should not be seen as replacing traditional means of communication, a realistic and cost-effective plan of action to meet the requirement of linguistic parity will need to be developed. In the event that Member States wish to approve of any new web site initiative involving expenditure, it would be necessary for a written statement of programme budget implications to be presented to the Committee on Information before it reaches any decision on the substance.

Annex I

Resource requirements of the Department of Public Information for the ongoing development and maintenance of United Nations web sites in all official languages

1. In order to ensure the continued development, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites in the official languages, the following additional resource requirements, above and beyond the resources allocated for this activity in the programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, would need to be considered by the General Assembly:

(a) The funding for the feasibility study proposed in paragraph 20 of the present report, amounting to $100,000;

(b) Eight new Professional posts and five General Service posts for the Information Technology Section in the Department of Public Information, as outlined below. These requirements have been updated following the conversion of three positions funded from general temporary assistance into established posts for the maintenance of sites in official languages and the redeployment of other posts from within the Department.

2. The following resource requirements pertain only to the requirements of the Department of Public Information with regard to the management, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites. They do not include infrastructure support requirements by the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, or requirements relating to the provision of content in other languages.

Component	*Posts required*	*Cost (United States dollars)*
Overall development	Web site applications specialist (P-3)	208 600
	Web site design specialist (P-3)	208 600
	Web site technical assistant (G-5/6)	115 500
	Web site design assistant (G-5/6)	115 500
	Secretary/clerk (G-4)	115 500
Each language unit (six units)	6 web site coordinators/editors (P-4)	1 502 400
	2 web site assistants (G-5/6)	231 000
Total cost of posts		**2 497 100**

Total Professional posts required: 8

Total General Service posts required: 5

Annex II

Web site addresses of United Nations offices away from Headquarters[a]

United Nations Office at Geneva	www.unog.ch
United Nations Office at Vienna	www.un.or.at
Economic Commission for Africa	www.un.org/Depts/eca
Economic Commission for Europe	www.unece.org
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean	www.eclac.cl
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	www.unescap.org
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	www.escwa.org.lb

[a] Does not include web site addresses of United Nations information centres or of the programmes and funds in the United Nations system.